

Second Nature and Animal Life

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Abstract

I am concerned in this paper with McDowell's account of human uniqueness in nature in terms of a fundamental difference between humans and animals. I try to show that the concept of that difference is relevant for a Wittgensteinian understanding of the place of rationality in nature. I then develop an internal criticism of McDowell's transcendental way of approaching this topic by using Diamond's insights about the importance of the details for a realistic philosophical account of human mindedness. My aim is to show that the difference between humans and animals is constitutive of our understanding of what it means to be humans, but this is not something we can explain in advance of looking at the weave of our life with them.

Essay

It is not uncommon among philosophers to say that humans and animals have a different kind of mindedness. What they mean is that, even if we are right in acknowledging animals as self-moving and responsive to features of their environment, only human beings can be properly said reflective speaking beings. As we may put it, we share with animals a perceptual sensitivity to the environment, and differ from them in our rationality. Thus, for example, both humans and animals can feel a pain, but only a human being can tell to others how that pain occurred. This fact has been acknowledged as a part of the problem of finding the place of reason in nature. Indeed, it is very difficult to spell out the peculiarity of the human condition, and even more to assess its relevance to our ethical commitments towards animals. So the disagreement among philosophers is about how to understand and assess the idea of a human uniqueness in nature.

I'll be concerned in this paper with John McDowell's original account of this topic, as it figures in his *Mind and World*. McDowell offers a conception of human mindedness that allows us to make sense of the question about the human uniqueness in nature out of

the Cartesian framework in which it is often asked. But I think it is important to see how McDowell arrives at facing the humans-animals distinction and the role it plays in the structure of his book. This will give me the occasion to develop some critical evaluations of McDowell's method concerning (what I take to be) a tension between his philosophical quietism and the kind of generality he is aiming at. This is also intended as an illustration of the importance of the starting-point for philosophical reflection on humans and animals.

I will begin by briefly sketching the overall topic of *Mind and World*. In those lectures, McDowell aims at uprooting the persistence of a dualistic picture of the relation between mind and world that gives rise to familiar anxieties about the nature of that relation and of its components. In general, this picture is historically identified within the post-Cartesian tradition, according to which the mind is separated from reality, reason from nature, and norms from facts. In McDowell's exposition, the anxiety takes the form of an oscillation between two exclusive and opposed philosophical positions, the Myth of the Given and the Coherentism. The dialectic of the oscillation arises in the context of a reflection about the world-directedness of thought, about, that is, the idea that the relation between thought and reality must be a normative one. This relation is normative if our judgments and beliefs are answerable to how things are in the world, so that they can be correct or incorrect according to whether or not things are thus and so. This is the idea Quine famously expressed through the metaphor of a "tribunal of experience". But, as McDowell notices, the idea of experience as a tribunal became problematic since the modern scientific revolution, which "made possible a newly clear conception of the distinctive kind of intelligibility that the natural sciences allow us to find in things" (McDowell 1994, XX). The point is that we have to "sharply distinguish natural-scientific intelligibility from the kind of intelligibility something acquires when we situate it in the logical space of reason" (McDowell 1994, XX). That is to say, we have to acknowledge a dichotomy of logical spaces, a difference in kind between concepts we employ when we locate something in a normative context (the space of reasons), and concepts we use in an

empirical description in order to situate something into the realm of law. The dichotomy of logical spaces, a distinction McDowell doesn't want to refute, may lead us in misleadingly identifying the natural with the realm of law. But in this way experience, conceived as “made up of impressions, impingements by the world on a possessor of sensory capacities” (McDowell 1994, XV), that is, as an essentially natural transaction, must be something that belongs to the realm of law. The conception of experience as mere impressions is that of the Myth of Given. The oscillation begins precisely when we feel ourselves forced to answer the question: How is it possible for experience to be a tribunal, if it is constituted by mere impressions?

The Myth of the Given side of the oscillation moves from the idea of an interface between our conceptual powers and the external world, so that our conceptual powers cannot reach all the way to the objects themselves. In this way, we feel the need for something like a warrant for our free and spontaneous exercises of concepts to not being a “self-contained game” (McDowell 1994, 5). In other words, we ask for a ground for the world-directedness of thought, something that can make experience intelligible in terms of answerability to a tribunal. According to this picture, the objectivity of our (empirical) thought depends on the possibility of finding a link between our exercises of concepts and the external reality. So, as a response to the worry about the possibility for our thought to be in touch with reality, the Myth of the Given offers a position according to which we can “acknowledge an external constraint on our freedom to deploy our empirical concepts” (McDowell 1994, 6) by grounding empirical justifications on impingements on the conceptual realm from outside. As McDowell puts it:

The idea is that when we have exhausted all the available moves within the space of concepts, all the available moves from one conceptually organized item to another, there is still one more step we can take: namely, pointing to something that is simply received in experience (McDowell 1994, 6).

The Myth of the Given conceives external constraints to the spontaneous exercises of concepts as brute impacts from the exterior, mere presences that are received in the space of concepts. But, as we so far have seen, if constraints are to be conceived as justifications for our empirical thought, we need *rational* constraints, and mere presences cannot work for that scope. What makes mythological the Myth of the Given is that it “offers exculpations where we wanted justifications” (McDowell 1994, 8).

The failure of the Myth of the Given in making experience intelligible as a tribunal is what prompts us to the other side of the seesaw: Coherentism. This is the position, famously held by Donald Davidson (see for instance Davidson 1986, 307-319), according to which if we want to do justice to the distinction between logical spaces, but still conceiving experience as made up of impressions, we cannot therefore think of it as a tribunal. Experience cannot stand in judgment over our empirical thinking, it can only be *causally* relevant to a subject's beliefs or judgment, and so we are forced to renounce the idea of a rational constraint external to our thought. That is to say, if we do not want to fall in the Myth of the Given, we *must* recognize that experience cannot count as a reason to holding a belief, since “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief” (Davidson 1986, 310). In this way, the Coherentist picture confines ourselves within the sphere of thinking, depriving us of the very possibility of being in touch with something outside it. As a result we have a recoil into the Myth of the Given, only to see again that it cannot help us in making sense of how our judgments bear on reality.

According to McDowell, to dismantle the oscillation means to unmask the appearance of a philosophical obligation in occupying both those positions as illusory. In order to do this, we need a non-dualistic picture of the encounter between mind and world. That is, we should not add a third *theory* of the relation between mind and world, but we should be able to find the space for rethinking the place of mind and thought *in* nature. As we'll see below, this space is made

available by the notion of “second nature”. Through this therapeutic notion, McDowell aims to show us a way to a position without theories, but with no need of a theory. It is to be a place where we can finally be relieved of the philosophical pressure to state one ultimate thesis that will get everything right, but which never seems to arrive. This quietistic method is explicitly related to Wittgenstein and to his idea of the nature of philosophical clarification. Before saying something about Wittgenstein's idea of clarification and how McDowell applies it through the notion of second nature, it may be useful to look at the way he arrives at discussing the humans-animals divide.

McDowell's way in showing that the Cartesian picture of a dualism between reason and nature is not compulsory goes through a rethinking of the interaction between sensibility and rationality. His working on the Kantian idea of spontaneity commits him to a position according to which it is essential to our conceptual capacities that they are already involved in operation of the receptivity. According to McDowell, avoiding the Myth of the Given, without denying a normative role for experience, requires us to conceive experience as conceptual. That is, we must be able to recognize that conceptual capacities are already drawn on *in* receptivity, both in the case of the empirical knowledge and in that of the inner experience, when we judge about our own perception, thoughts, sensations and the like. That experience is conceptual means that conceptual capacities are not exercised *on* an extra-conceptual deliverance of receptivity. At the same time, to say that experience is conceptual doesn't mean that we create it. McDowell admits that “because experience is passive, the involvement of conceptual capacities in experience does not by itself provide a good fit for the idea of a faculty of spontaneity”, but the crucial point is that:

How one's experience represents things to be is not under one's control, but it is up to one whether one accepts the appearance or rejects it. Moreover, even if one considers judgments that register experience itself, which are already active in that minimal sense, we must acknowledge that the capacity to use concepts in those judgments is not self-standing; it cannot be in place independently of a capacity to use the same concepts outside that context (McDowell 1994, 10-11).

This means that we are able to judge, for example, that something is red only because we are already able to move into the space of reasons, because we have a “background understanding that includes, for instance, the concept of visible surface of objects and the concept of suitable conditions for telling what color something is by looking at it” (McDowell 1994, 12). In the case of perception, McDowell's claim that the content of experience is conceptual amounts to the claim that perceptual episodes occurring in a human life are of a kind such that they must themselves be understood in terms that imply the power to reason about the relevance of such episodes to that life itself. This is the way experience (and perception, as an important aspect of the human condition) matters to us, the way we are open to the world.

I think that to understand this point is a good way to make sense of, or give content to, the idea of second nature. McDowell introduces this notion in order to make available a perspective from which we are not forced anymore to see our rationality as detached from our animal being. This is intended as the quietistic achievement of a position from which we can look at reason in terms of something natural. The notion of a human second nature, understood as a non-theoretical notion, is the reconciling reminder that we are animals whose natural being is permeated and transformed through and through by rationality. McDowell explains this point as follows:

Human beings are intelligibly initiated into [...] the space of reasons by [an] upbringing, which instills the appropriate shape into their lives. The resulting habits of thought and action are second nature (McDowell 1994, 84).

This means that through the idea of second nature, we can say that our rationality is part of (our) nature, and that our nature is the way it is because of a special relation between the biological features or potentialities we were born with and our upbringing, or *Bildung*. This special relation connecting what we may call our first and our second nature is, again, not to be understood as the exercise of conceptual capacities on an extra-conceptual Given; the relation is a *transformative*¹ one, in which what we perceive (and desire, feel, or experience in general) is already and inextricably informed by the presence of language, culture, and rationality. In a word, we have inherited a *tradition*.

So it is not that we share the same perceptual system with animals, on which rationality simply sit atop. In McDowell's terminology, this would amounts to have a "highest common factor" conception of perception (McDowell 1994, 113), which is a version of the Myth of the Given. In appealing to second nature we are able to spell out and make intelligible what is unique about human beings as opposed to other animals, *the difference* between *us* and *them*, by reminding ourselves that our nature is rational in that peculiar way.

We have so far seen that in *Mind and World* the discussion about humans and animals is introduced as an illustration of an idea of conceptuality that could resist a conception of mind and experience informed by the mythology of the Givenness. We have also seen that to speak as McDowell does of *the* difference between humans and animals means that the distinction at issue points to a diversity *in kind* concerning what we take to be unique about the human condition. What I think McDowell is urging us to recognize is that the difference between us and them is embedded in the realm of meaning, that it is a conceptual distinction and not something we discover through empirical observations. But what is the point of saying that the notion of the difference is embedded in the realm of meaning? And where we should look at to see in a perspicuous way the conceptual connections that we inherited as constitutive of our *Bildung* and that articulate the idea of this difference? I think that a

good answer to these questions may come from the acknowledgement of the importance of the starting point for philosophical reflection on humans and animals.

I want to quote a passage from Cora Diamond's paper *Eating Meat, Eating People*:

The difference between human beings and animals is not to be discovered by studies of Washoe or the activities of dolphins. It is not that sort of study or ethology or evolutionary theory that is going to tell us the difference between us and animals: the difference is [...] a central concept for human life and is more an object of contemplation than observation [...]. One source of confusion here is that we fail to distinguish between 'the difference between animals and people' and 'the differences between animals and people'. [...] In the case of the difference between animals and people, it is clear that we form the idea of this difference, create the concept of the difference, knowing perfectly well the overwhelmingly obvious similarities (Diamond 1991, 324).

Diamond is saying that any discovery of similarities between humans and animals with respect to properties or capacities that we might have previously considered as necessary conditions for being a person (such as the capacity to communicate) could not diminish our sense of *the* difference between us and them. Her point is against such authors as Singer and Regan who think that any appeal to a fundamental difference between human beings and animals amounts to a form of speciesism. In maintaining the difference, both Diamond's and McDowell's discussions could be read as a radical criticism of those theoretical positions that debunk the importance in ethics of the concept of human being. But I'll be not concerned with this criticism here. Instead, I want to focus on what distinguishes McDowell's and Diamond's accounts of human specialness.

McDowell's interest in the humans-animals divide is prompted by the threat of a certain intellectual embarrassment on the subject of animals; since his picture of our being open to the world is a consequence of our ability to engage in the conceptually articulated

thought that records how things are in that world – that is, a consequence of the operation of the faculty of spontaneity – he is led to an austere position about other animals' mindedness. For, if “the objective world is present only to a self-conscious subject's ability to ascribe experiences to herself” and “it is the spontaneity of the understanding, the power of conceptual thinking, that brings both the world and the self into view”, it follows that “creatures without conceptual capacities lack self-consciousness and [...] experience of the objective reality” (McDowell 1994, 114). So, in McDowell's view, we *must* recognize that mere animals have only a kind of proto-subjectivity, and not the full-fledged subjectivity which is the exclusive prerogative of human beings. Even if animals are not Cartesian *automata*, their life is “structured exclusively by immediate biological imperatives”, and it is “shaped by goals whose control of the animal's behavior at a given moment is an immediate outcome of biological forces” (McDowell 1994, 115).

It seems that McDowell is prompted to speak about animals only by a theoretical interest in defending his picture of human nature as essentially second nature against the idea of non-conceptual experience. He focuses on animal mindedness considering it as nothing more than a hard-case to test the validity of his picture of rationality. This argumentative requirement seems to drive him to a traditional task of constructive philosophy – that of demarcating the limits of subjectivity – that is at odds with the nature and the purpose of his own conception of clarification. In fact, for a quietistic account of rationality and of the humans-animals divide it should be enough to stop at the point in which we are led to see the intelligibility of a position outside the oscillation, and that is obtained by picturing human nature as essentially a *second* nature.

But in those passages McDowell is shifting his perspective, making a non innocent move from a therapeutic use of the notion of second nature to what might seem the basis of a substantive philosophical thesis about human rationality. For one thing is to offer a reconciling picture of human mindedness pointing to the fact that

“we have what mere animals have, perceptual sensitivity to features of our environment, but we have it in a special form” (McDowell 1994, 64), in order to show that it is not compulsory to us to see human mind as something detached from nature; a different thing is to say that animal lives are structured exclusively by immediate biological imperatives, or that they have a proto-subjectivity, and so on, as the result of a transcendental argument about the distinction between humans and animals. By tracing in advance the boundaries of what can be said properly human, McDowell fosters a sense of strangeness in thinking of reason as part of nature that is at odds with his own quietistic aspiration. My criticism is thus concerned with this Kantian inkling in McDowell's exposition, a transcendental element of a Kant not read after Wittgenstein.

Diamond's way of approaching the idea of a fundamental difference between human beings and animals is different in its spirit. She says that:

A difference like that may indeed start out as a biological difference, but it becomes something for human thought through being taken up and made something *of* – by generation of human beings, in their practices, their art, their literature, their religion, their ethics. [...] It is absurd to think that these are questions you should try to answer in some sort of totally general terms, quite independently of seeing what particular human sense people have *actually* made out of the differences or similarities you are concerned with. And this is not predictable (Diamond 1991, 351).

Again, Diamond is speaking against utilitarian account of animal ethics. But it is possible to read her words as a correction, or as an internal or sympathetic criticism of an aspect of McDowell's Kantianism. From her point of view, the reality of the gulf we may find in our relations with animals is part of our life with them, and not the result of a transcendental argument about the powers of the mind. The reality of the difference lies, for instance, in the fact that we cannot seriously write a biography of a dog, or in the fact that we learn the concept of human being also by sitting at a table and eating

meat. In general, we create the concept of the difference through the variety of our responses to animal life, and that should be the starting point for a realistic philosophical account of the human specialness.

So my point is that McDowell's discussion about the difference in kind between humans and animals fails to be a good illustration of his own conception of conceptuality. What I take to be a general worry about McDowell's treatment of human rationality is that he tends to not being attentive to the details of our conceptual life. He offers a general account of the encounter of mind and world, and argues that in the relation between thought and reality the latter is given conceptually, and that we find our way in the world by being sensitive to the dictates of reason. But this tends to downplay the variety of ways we actually make sense of the world, the ways of our being sensitive to reality.

I want to focus on this point, and conclude with some brief remarks about McDowell's quietism and his Kantian way of proceeding. Recently (McDowell 2009a, 256-272 and McDowell 2009b, 308-323) McDowell has modified his view about the sense in which our sensory capacities are conceptual. The crucial assumption that McDowell has rejected is that the actualization of conceptual capacities in experience, which is required for experience to stand within the space of reasons, means that experience must have a propositionally articulated conceptual content. Thought of in this way, experience has a *that-structure*, such that one can hear that there is a river ahead or see that there is a book on the desk. What is distinctive about the propositional content is not just this that-structure, but that the content which it captures is the same as the content figuring in judgments or beliefs registering that things are thus and so. It is this idea that McDowell now questions, rather than the intuitively plausible notion that we can experience that something is the case. That is, experience is still conceived as conceptual, but now McDowell acknowledges a more complex idea of what it means for us to have an experience and, related to this, that the exercise of our conceptual capacities is not reducible to mere judge-making. For

if experience, on which judgments are made, has a conceptual shape, which particular conceptual shape does it have? In order to answer to this question, we should look at the actual experiences we may have in particular situations. This is the reason why McDowell now grants that experience is not always discursively conceptually shaped. This picture of conceptuality requires a *look and see* strategy that is able to show the articulation of the meanings we are responsive to. In the case of our idea of a human specialness, this, again, would amount to answer to the question “what human beings have made of the difference between human beings and animals?” (Diamond 1991, 350).

In the light of this reminder, it is possible to state the kind of criticism I proposed by saying that McDowell does not give content to the idea that the humans-animals divide may be something deeply rooted in our life, and that's because it takes it to be just an hard case to test the validity of his own answer to the Big Question about the general encounter of mind and world.

This point about the big philosophical questions brings us to the issue of philosophical clarification, as Wittgenstein understood it. In her paper *Criss-Cross Philosophy*, Diamond is concerned with Wittgenstein's criticism of his early conception of philosophical method. Diamond characterizes the difference between Wittgenstein's early and later method as one regarding the ability to practice philosophical clarifications “not in the shadow of a big question”. From Wittgenstein's later point of view, the *Tractatus* presents a piecemeal approach to philosophical problems which is still guided by the idea that in philosophy we face fundamental problems, as the one about the essence of proposition. As Diamond says:

[In the *Tractatus*] the search for the essence of language is, in theory, *überwunden*, overcome. But it is really still with us, in an ultimately unsatisfactory, unsatisfying, conception of what it is to clarify what we say (Diamond 2004, 207).

In order to escape the big questions, it is important to see philosophy as made up of particular problems. The *Investigations* show us the possibility of a piecemeal method that face philosophical problems as standing on their own. And it accomplishes this task, for instance, by offering different kinds of language games, that is, imagining particular and concrete situations. This is part of the reason why in Wittgenstein's writings we cannot find anything like this: Since beliefs are intelligible only as situated in the weave of our life, it is a mistake to think of a dog as having any.

In this paper I tried to present McDowell's account of human specialness in terms of a fundamental difference between humans and animals. I also tried to show that the concept of that difference is relevant for a Wittgensteinian understanding of the place of rationality in nature. I then developed an internal criticism of McDowell's transcendental way of approaching this topic by using Diamond's insights about the importance of the details for a realistic philosophical account of human mindedness. My aim was to show that the difference between humans and animals, between *us* and *them*, is constitutive of our understanding of what it means to be humans, but this is not something we can explain in advance of looking at the weave of our life with them.

Notes

1. I took this label from an unpublished text by James Conant.

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